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AUTHOR Brody, Leslie R.
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ABSTRACT

Three studies explored age, sex, and individual differences in children's defensiveness about four feelings: happiness, anger, sadness, and fear. Also investigated was the relation between children's defensiveness and their mothers' comfort with and expression of feelings. Participants included children ranging in age from 4 through 11 years of age and their mothers. The primary measure used to assess defensiveness was the quality and intensity of children's emotional attributions toward themselves and others as story protagonists. In the second study, two additional measures were used: a self-report scale indicating children's tendencies to deny commonly experienced socially undesirable thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and a scale with which mothers rated children's defensiveness. In the third study, mothers additionally completed a self-report measure of emotional styles. Results of the first study provided evidence of defensiveness among 7-, 9-, and 11-year-old children. The second study provided additional evidence that, even at the ages of 4 and 6 years, children behave defensively. Age and sex differences were found to emerge on the emotional attribution task but not on the social desirability scale or parent rating form. Results of the second study also suggested that, within age groups, children may vary individiually in their defensive styles. Preliminary results of the third study indicated that mothers who are not comfortable with their own feelings may promote defensiveness in their children. (RH)

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Children's Emotional Attributions to Themselves and Others: A Measure of Children's Defensiveness

Leslie R. Brody
Boston University

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Child clinical psychologists commonly recognize that children are reluctant to reveal or admit to negative and intense feelings, such as anger and sadness. Questions like "How do you feel?" routinely elicit responses like "Fine," "Okay," or "Happy." This reluctance, refusal, or inability to acknowledge negative or intense feelings has been conceptualized as defensiveness by a diverse group of theorists (A. Freud, 1946; Haan, 1977; Plutchik, 1979; Rogers, 1951; Vaillant, 1971). These theorists make different assumptions about whether defensiveness is a conscious or an unconscious process; and about whether its function is to present the self in a socially acceptable light (Rogers, 1951), to mediate among internal personality structures (Freud, 1917/1957), or to cope with conflicts over particular feelings (Plutchik, 1979). Yet despite differences, theorists concur that defensiveness is a process in which experiences and feelings are distorted, and that it originates in part from social pressures on the acceptability of expressing or experiencing certain feelings.

What are the nature of these social pressures on the expression of emotion? One way to answer this question is to examine the items on social desirability scales designed for children, such as the Comprehensive Social Desirability Scale for Children (CSDC: Walsh, Tomlinson-

Keasey & Kliegar, 1974) and the Children's Social Desirability Scale (CSDS: Crandall, Crandall & Katkovsky, 1965). These scales indicate that the expression of negative and intense feelings is socially unacceptable. For example, two of the items on the CSDC Scale are "Do you yell in the house?" and "Do you get mad easily?", both of which reveal that the intense expression of feelings is socially unacceptable, whereas an item on the CSDS asks "Are you usually happy?", an item which indicates that positive feelings are socially acceptable.

Social pressures on the expression of emotion may vary for each sex as well as for different socioeconomic groups. We have all heard the expression, "Boys don't cry" many times. Boys are encouraged to express aggression and girls to express other emotions like sadness, happiness, and fear, according to research on both parent socialization practices (Block, 1973) and on preschoolers' emotional sex role stereotypes (Birnbaum, Nosanchuk, and Croll, 1980).

Research exploring children's defensiveness varies widely, not only in the assumptions made about the functions and origins of defensiveness, but also in the measures used to assess it. In general, research using a variety of measures, including both self-report scales and projective techniques, suggests that defensiveness in the form of denying socially undesirable feelings may be characteristic of children as young as age 2-1/2 (Walsh, et.al., 1974), and that children may be increasingly defensive through about age 8 (Glasberg & Aboud, 1982; Haan, 1977; Hill & Sarason, 1966; Smith & Danielsson, 1982). At this age children may begin to deal with feelings using processes which are more complex than simple denial, as Dr. Cramer's work today indicates

(Cramer, 1983b). In some studies, boys have been found to be more defensive than are girls (Gilbert, 1969; Hill & Sarason, 1966), while in others, no sex differences have been found (Douglas & Rice, 1979). Previous researchers have not explored relations among different measures of defensiveness, the specific qualities of emotions children deny, individual differences in children's patterns of defensiveness, or the relations between children's defensiveness and parental emotional styles.

In my paper today, I will be discussing several studies which explore age, sex, and individual differences in children's defensiveness about four feelings: happiness, anger, sadness, and fear, as well as the relation between children's defensiveness and their mothers' comfort with and expression of feelings. The primary measure used to assess defensiveness was the quality and intensity of children's emotional attributions to themselves and others as story protagonists. I am defining defensiveness in these studies as children's tendency to deny or censure socially undesirable feelings, that is, negative and intense feelings, especially when these feelings are situationally appropriate.

In the first study, which I did in conjunction with Alice Carter, we explored age and sex differences in school-aged children's defensiveness (Brody & Carter, 1982). Our primary hypothesis was that children would not attribute socially unacceptable emotions, e.g., anger and sadness, to themselves as story protagonists, but would attribute these emotions to amgibuous characters as story protagonists in the same situations. We wrote five stories, which were each designed to

elicit at least two emotions on the part of the story protagonist, one of which was always anger. Our intent was to design stories for which anger was a situationally appropriate response. The five stories are shown in Table 1.

The sample of children consisted of 72 Caucasian, lower class children, divided into three equal groups of 7, (M age = 6-10), 9 (M age = 9-0), and 11 year olds (M age = 11-0), half boys and half girls at each age. Each child was told each story twice--once with him/herself as story protagonist, that is "you," and once with an ambiguous character as story protagonist, that is, "Mary" or "John." The sex of the character was changed to match the sex of the child being tested. All five stories were told from the perspective of one character, and after a 15 minute delay, re-told from the perspective of the second character. The order in which stories were told to children was counterbalanced for story protagonist within each age by sex group.

Before being told any stories, children were shown pictures of faces depicting the four emotions happiness, anger, sadness, and fear. Each emotion was depicted with three degrees of intensity--a little, some, and a lot. These faces are depicted in Figure 1. After hearing each story, children were asked to verbalize and to point to as many feelings as they thought the story protagonist might feel.

Repeated measures ANOVAs were computed, using age, sex, quality of affect, and story protagonist as independent variables, and the intensity and frequency of each emotion attributed as dependent variables. The results revealed that all children attributed more sadness and fear to others than to themselves and more happiness to

themselves than to others ($F(3,198) = 9.01$, $p < .001$). These results are displayed in Table 2. Children also attributed more intense emotions to others ($M = 2.22$) than to themselves ($M = 2.04$) ($F(1,66) = 4.25$, $p < .05$). There were no age effects, but sex differences did emerge: boys attributed more intense happiness and less intense fear to both themselves and others than did girls ($F(3.66) = 4.24$, $p < .01$).

The results of this study thus provide evidence for defensiveness in school-aged children, who censure socially unacceptable feelings (sadness and fear) when attributing feelings to themselves, but who attribute these feelings to ambiguous characters in stories. The fact that no differences emerged in the attribution of anger to self vs. other may be due to the fact that the five stories were designed to elicit anger. It is possible that children are less compelled to censure socially undesirable affects when they are clearly situationally appropriate. The sex differences which emerged are consistent with differential sex role socialization pressures on the expression of emotion. These results also justify the use of projective story telling techniques, such as the TAT, to obtain information about children's socially undesirable feelings.

The second study I wish to talk about today I did in conjunction with Margaret Rozek and Erik Muten (Brody, Rozek, & Muten, 1983). The purpose of the study was to explore defensiveness in a younger age group consisting of 4- and 6-year olds, and to compare the quality and intensity of children's emotional attributions to themselves and others with other measures of children's defensiveness. Nineteen 4-year olds (M age = 4-4; 7 girls and 12 boys) and twenty-two 6-year olds

(M age = 5-9; 13 girls and 9 boys), all middle class Caucasians, participated in the research. Each child was individually administered the same emotional attribution task described in the previous study, except that 3 more stories were added for a total of 8 stories altogether. They were also individually administered the Children's Social Desirability Scale (CSDS: Walsh et.al., 1974), a self-report scale concerning children's tendencies to deny commonly experienced socially undesirable thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Finally, mothers were asked to complete an 11 item Children's Defensive Behavior Scale (CDBS), which was designed for use in the present study. Some of the items on the scale were adapted from measures of adult defensiveness, such as the Life Style Adaptation Questionnaire (cf. Plutchik, 1979). The scale consists of 11 items, which are displayed in Table 3, along with varimax orthogonal rotated factor loadings of the items. Three factors emerged, which accounted for 62% of the variance: an internalization factor, consisting of items reflecting repression and withdrawal from feelings (cf. Achenbach, 1966); a denial factor, consisting of items reflecting the overt denial of feelings; and a stoicism factor, consisting of items reflecting the tolerance of pain.

There were no age or sex differences on any of the three factors, or on the social desirability scale, as revealed by Age x sex ANOVAs. However, 6-year olds attributed less intense emotions to themselves and to others than did 4-year olds ($F(1,37) = 18.46$, $p < .001$) and boys attributed less intense emotions to themselves and to others than did girls $F(1,37) = 3.92$, $p < .05$, as revealed by repeated measures ANOVAs in which age, sex, affect quality, and story protagonist were independent

variables and the frequency and intensity of emotional attributions were dependent variables. Since emotional intensity tends to be socially unacceptable, these results may indicate that young school-aged children are more defensive than are preschool-aged children, possibly because of an increase in social pressures surrounding school attendance; and that boys are more defensive than are girls, possibly because of differential sex-role social pressures on emotional expression. One alternative possibility is that boys and older children attribute less intense emotions to stories than do girls and younger children because they actually experience less intense emotions.

Children attributed emotions differentially to themselves vs. others on the emotional attribution task, as they had in the previous study. Both 4- and 6-year olds attributed more happiness to themselves than to others $F(1, 40) = 8.44$, $p < .01$ and tended to attribute more sadness to others than to themselves $F(1, 40) = 2.93$, $p = .09$. These results are depicted in Table 4. Further evidence for the existence of defensiveness in these young children is provided by their scores on the social desirability scale, which were significantly greater than a chance score for both age groups ($t(17) = 7.38$, $p < .001$ for 4-year olds, $t(20) = 10.07$, $p < .001$ for 6-year olds).

The relations among the three measures of defensiveness (the emotional attribution task, the social desirability scale, and the maternal rating scale of children's defensive behaviors) were explored in three multiple regression analyses. The outcome measures in these analyses were factor scale scores on the three CDBS factors (internalization, denial, and stoicism), and the predictor variables were the

average frequency and intensity of the four emotions attributed to the self and others as story protagonists, and the social desirability score (CSDC). These five predictor variables predicted internalization at a .06 probability level $F(5, 26) = 2.48$, $p = .06$. Analyses further revealed that children rated as using internalization attributed significantly more intense emotions to themselves, $t(28) = 2.65$, $p < .01$, and significantly less intense emotions to others, $t(28) = 2.63$, $p < .01$. Neither denial nor stoicism were significantly predicted by the five variables. However, children rated as using denial tended to have higher social desirability scores than did children rated as using less denial, $t(26) = 1.77$, $p = .09$.

The relations among the measures of defensiveness were further explored with two-tailed Pearson-r correlations between the frequency and intensity of each emotion 4- and 6-year old children attributed to the stories and factor scale scores on the maternal rating form. These correlations are displayed in Table 5. I do not have time to discuss all of the significant correlations, and will limit myself to only a few. For 4-year olds, there was a significant positive correlation between denial factor scale scores and the intensity of anger attributed to others, and a significant negative correlation between denial factor scale scores and the intensity of anger attributed to the self. In other words, children rated by mothers as using denial attributed intense anger to others but not to themselves. Also, the higher the internalization factor scale score, the more frequently sadness was attributed to others by 4-year olds, while a similar trend emerged for 6-year olds.

What might the reasons be for the findings that the higher the internalization score, the more frequent the sadness attributed to the other, the more intense the feelings attributed to the self, and the less intense the feelings attributed to the other? It may be that internalizing children actually experience sadder, more intense feelings than do non-internalizing children, because they direct other emotions, like anger, toward themselves, instead of expressing them. This internalization process may transform many of their emotions into sad and intense feelings (cf S. Freud, 1917/1957). An alternative explanation is that children who experience sad and intense feelings frequently may internalize their emotions in order to avoid being overly expressive. The hypothesis that experiencing highly intense or frequently sad feelings leads to the process of internalization is analogous to Eysenck's (1952) hypothesis that individuals with higher cortical excitation and lower sensory thresholds tend to be more introverted and inhibited in order to avoid overstimulation. A third explanation is that internalization and the quality of emotional experience do not have a cause and effect relationship. Both may be influenced by other variables not explored in the present study, e.g., the quality of parenting.

The finding that 4-year olds who had higher scores on the denial factor attributed more intense anger to others, and less intense anger to themselves, than children who had lower scores on the denial factor is in accordance with an assumption of the present group of studies, that is, that intense emotions are less socially acceptable than mild emotions and that children who are defensive will tend to attribute

those feelings more often to others, and less often to themselves. The non-significant relation between high scores on the denial factor and high social desirability scores for both 4- and 6-year olds is also in accordance with an assumption of the present group of studies, and suggests that the two measures of defensiveness, a parent rating form and a self-report scale, tend to measure the same defensive process.

The results of this second study confirm previous work that children behave defensively quite young (Crandall et.al., 1965). The findings that age and sex differences emerged on the emotional attribution task, but not on the social desirability scale or parent rating form of children's defensiveness, suggests that age and sex differences in defensiveness may be task-specific. Task and sample specific findings in defensive behavior are understandable when defensiveness is theorized to be the presentation of the self in accordance with socially acceptable standards, since social pressures may vary by sex, age, socioeconomic status, and the nature of the assessed behavior.

This study also preliminarily suggests that children may vary in their defensive style. Although, as Dr. Cramer's work (Cramer, 1979; 1983a; 1983b) indicates, there are developmental differences in the types of defenses used, the present study suggests that there may be individual differences within age groups as well. Some children may direct their feelings inward as a way of coping with social pressures surrounding emotional expression, whereas others may simply refuse to acknowledge their feelings. Another possibility is that defensiveness may be specific to certain feelings, that is, some children may defend

against physical pain whereas others defend against particular feelings like sadness.

The final study I would like to mention briefly is one I am presently working on in conjunction with Lesley Landau (Brody & Landau, 1983). We are exploring the relation between mothers' comfort with and expression of emotions, using a self-report measure developed by Allen and Hamscher (1974), and the quality and intensity of children's emotional attributions to stories, using the same measure I described in the first study (Brody & Carter, 1982). The sample consists of 28 middle-class Caucasian preschoolers and their mothers, 15 boys and 13 girls, M ages = 51.8 months and 52.2 months, respectively. Results have revealed that mothers who are comfortable with sadness and anger have children who attribute more intense emotions to themselves than children whose mothers are not comfortable with sadness and anger $F(1, 24) = 5.88$, $p < .05$. Mothers who are not comfortable with anger have children who attribute more intense emotions to others than to themselves; whereas mothers who are comfortable with anger have children who attribute equally intense emotions to themselves and to others $F(1, 24) = 3.77$, $p < .05$. These results are displayed in Table 6. The preliminary results of this study thus indicate that mothers who are not comfortable with their own feelings may promote defensiveness in their children, in that their children attribute more intense emotions to others than they do to themselves. Children may model their mothers' discomfort with anger or sadness, which would then be reflected in the differential quality of their attributions to themselves vs. others. Children may also learn to be uncomfortable with intense feelings because the expression of such feelings may have

negative consequences, such as parental rejection or discomfort (cf. Malatesta & Haviland, 1982). More generally, the results suggest that the origins of defensiveness lie partly in the socialization process.

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